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Young people's perspectives on school counselling

A survey study

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Abstract

While school counselling is well established in secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand, there have been few resources available to establish a complementary research base. This article reports on a small survey study that investigated the perspectives of young people who had used school counselling services during the two weeks of the online survey. The survey replicated one strategy employed within a much larger evaluation study of the counselling services in three schools in Glasgow, Scotland. In focusing on only one research strategy—student self-report via survey—the study makes a small contribution to discussion of evaluation practices for school guidance counselling in New Zealand. As in the larger Glasgow study, young people in the small sample in this study evaluated school counselling as helpful across a number of dimensions of their lives.

Keywords: school counselling, young people, evaluation, survey, pedagogy of listening

> *In recent years I have become a passionate advocate of school counselling, seeing it as a non-stigmatising, accessible, and effective form of early intervention, which ensures that every young person has someone to talk to in times of trouble. However, I also believe that school counselling needs to demonstrate its worth, and that it can draw on research findings to improve the quality of services offered to young people.* (Cooper, 2009, p. 138)

School guidance counselling in Aotearoa New Zealand has a long history of offering young people an accessible and very effective service in times of trouble. There are many accounts of how such services play out in practice (see, for example, Agee,

1997; Blackett & Hermansson, 2005; Ferguson, 2012; Hughes, 2011, 2012; Hughes, Burke, Graham, Crocket, & Kotzé, 2013; Kotzé & Crocket, 2011; Kotzé, Crocket, Burke, Graham, & Hughes, 2013; McMenamin, 2004, 2014; Williams & Winslade, 2008; Winslade & Williams, 2011). School counselling has had many strong advocates over time. But there is no significant research base associated with school guidance counselling in New Zealand, and there is a particular absence of the across-school or within-school evaluative studies of the kinds favoured in the contemporary neoliberal policy environment. Cooper's (2009) call, above, is for research that serves two purposes. The first is to demonstrate the value of school counselling: the audiences here are the wider administrative systems within which counsellors practise, as well as counsellors themselves. The second purpose is to provide research evidence that will inform and enrich counselling practice: the primary audience here is the community of school counsellors, with the wider administrative system being a secondary audience. The study reported here is one small initiative towards beginning to produce a body of research based in Aotearoa New Zealand that evaluates school guidance counselling, potentially demonstrating its worth—in this case, from the perspective of student clients.

A raft of recent studies have investigated a wide range of aspects of school counselling provision in various parts of the UK, perhaps pointing to possibilities for replication of this research in Aotearoa New Zealand. The methods used in the UK studies range from exploratory (for example, Westergaard, 2013), through thematic analyses (Lynass, Pykhtina, & Cooper, 2012; Prior, 2012a), to randomised controlled trials (for example, Cooper et al., 2010; McArthur, Cooper, & Berdondini, 2012), with many studies involving multiple research strategies. The pluralistic design of Cooper's (2004, 2006) Scottish evaluative studies, for example, combined a range of research strategies from multiple perspectives: in-person interviews with clients and pastoral care staff, and telephone interviews with nominated other school staff; questionnaires for clients and pastoral care staff; the Young-Person's CORE (Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation)(see Twigg et al., 2009), a questionnaire administered before and at the end of counselling as an indicator of clients' mental health; and analysis of pupil attendance and exclusion records. This extensive and rigorous multi-method evaluation was made possible in the context of pilot projects funded to provide and evaluate counselling services in three schools.

The pilot context of the Cooper (2004, 2006) studies points to the significant differences, particularly in respect of the provision of guidance and counselling, between school administrative systems *within* the UK, and *between* those systems and

secondary schools in New Zealand. In the UK the term "school-based counselling" is used, denoting variable provision across the UK: "provision is good in England, but it's provided in so many different ways, by independent counsellors, charities, local authorities and even some teachers" (Cromarty, cited in Jackson, 2012, p. 7). Recently published UK studies have been evaluations of counselling provided on the school site—*school-based*—but by counsellors who are not members of the school staff: "*in* the school, but not *of* the school" (Cooper, 2004, p. 7). Thus, we suggest, it is the methods used and the range of foci of evaluation that may be useful to researchers in Aotearoa New Zealand, while the applicability of the findings from this research in UK schools cannot be assumed.

A further notable feature of recent UK school counselling evaluative studies is their emphasis on person-centred, humanistic counselling in particular (see Cooper, 2009). This emphasis can be understood in the light of Hawkins' (2012) note, in respect of Department of Health funding for psychological therapies for adolescents: "it seems the Government has listened to us when we say young people want more than CBT" (p. 45). The advocacy for school counselling, to which Cooper refers in the opening quotation above, might perhaps be understood as advocacy not just for the provision of *counselling* to young people in schools, but also for provision to include more than CBT (see Jackson, 2012)—and humanistic therapies in particular.

While questions of how to evaluate and what to evaluate have most potential transfer to school counselling research in a New Zealand context, findings about client experience also offer potential foci for New Zealand evaluation studies. Cooper's (2009) review of 30 audit and evaluation studies of counselling services offered a picture of a "'typical' young person" coming to school-based counselling:

> *they are likely to be around 14 years old, experiencing psychological difficulties that have been present for six months or more and at a level close to those attending CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services], and somewhat more likely to be female.… By the end of counselling they are likely to be feeling significantly better, and are likely to attribute a large part of this improvement to counselling.* (p. 147)

While noting that most young people have reported significant benefit from counselling, Cooper pointed out that there are questions about the reliability of self-report data. He made the argument for the use of pre- and post-therapy measures, such as YP-CORE. A subsequent study in Wales evaluated the outcomes of school-based

counselling using data from 3,613 episodes of counselling (Cooper, Pybis, Hill, Jones, & Cromarty, 2013). These researchers reported that "school-based counselling, as delivered in the UK, is associated with significant reductions in psychological distress, with a magnitude of improvement that is commensurate with therapeutic interventions in adult and NHS mental health services" (p. 95). Based on a smaller sample of five schools and a qualitative study, Lynass et al. (2012) noted the following most frequently occurring changes for young people: "feeling more confident; talking about things more easily; other people noticing changes; improved relationships with family and friends; thinking differently; feeling happier" (p. 61).

These UK studies do not tell us about school counselling in New Zealand, with its particular provision of school guidance counselling services that have been well established within most secondary schools for 50 years. While there was a history of guidance services, the Education Amendment No. 2 Act (1964) specifically required the provision of guidance and counselling. As in the UK, school counselling in New Zealand was introduced in response to identified social needs—unlike the US, where the emphasis on educational guidance, and group work, is much stronger (see Besley, 2002; Cooper, 2009; Crocket, Flanagan, Winslade, & Kotze, 2011). What we do know, however, is that current research identifies that the mental health of young people in New Zealand, as in the UK, is of increasing concern (Cooper et al., 2010; Fleming et al., 2014). Fleming et al. identified an "apparent small decline in mental health of NZ secondary school students between 2007 and 2012," suggesting a "need for ongoing monitoring and for interventions that promote well-being and prevent mental ill-health" (p. 479). School counsellors are at the front line of such services for young people. In considering appropriate service provision, it is useful to understand something of young people's experiences of school counselling, and how they might contribute to the conversations about appropriate provision of services.

Acknowledging the limitations of self-reporting noted by Cooper (2009), this small study is nonetheless a contribution to beginning to build a base from which more comprehensive evaluative studies of school counselling in New Zealand might be undertaken. While there might be anecdotal evidence that, in New Zealand (as the research suggests in the UK), school counselling offers services that reduce young people's psychological distress in levels commensurate with CAMHS, without a stronger evidence base the value of school counselling to young people's wellbeing may well be underestimated.

A review of the provision of guidance and counselling in New Zealand schools was undertaken by the Education Review Office (ERO) in 2013 as one focus of the Prime Minister's Youth Mental Health Project. Phase one of this review (ERO, 2013a) included surveys of young people, school leaders, and guidance counsellors. It should be noted that this review focused on *guidance and* counselling: it is not always clear which findings relate specifically to the specialist work of school counsellors, or if the study's informants understood the distinctions. For example, respondents were asked who else provided guidance and counselling in their schools and most young people were reported as identifying deans, form teachers, school nurses, and youth workers. While some of those in these roles may have training in the provision of guidance, few would be professional counsellors. Further, it was reported that young people suggested that there should be improvement to confidentiality and professionalism in the way guidance and counselling works. However, by conflating guidance and counselling, and using these terms very loosely, the study and the report of the findings potentially work against professionalism by not distinguishing the particular contribution that school counsellors make or the particular responsibilities—for example, for client confidentiality—within counselling codes of ethics.

The ERO contracted the Ministry of Youth Development (MYD) to recruit for and administer the Phase one student survey, as part of the wider review. Despite the substantial resources of MYD, only 91 young people responded, most of whom were in years 11–13 or had left school. Fifty-one respondents did not respond, or responded "not applicable" to the item "I have been to a guidance counsellor and they helped me," suggesting that fewer than half of those who completed the survey had first-hand experience of counselling at school. Forty-one per cent of all respondents indicated that they had been to a counsellor and they had been helped. During the second phase of the review (ERO, 2013b), a review team visited schools and conducted a further student survey, with 671 respondents. Again more than half the respondents (60%) appeared not to have had first-hand experience of counselling at school, but 30% of total respondents indicated that they had been to the counsellor and they had been helped. The survey asked students what changes to the counselling service they would suggest. These were reported as:

- making the guidance and counselling service easier to access—e.g., available at all times including after school or during lunch times
- having more guidance counsellors
- raising the profile of the guidance counsellor within the school

- moving the guidance counsellor's office to allow for more privacy
- making it more socially acceptable to see someone for guidance and counselling
- having guidance counsellors that the students could relate to more easily. (ERO, 2013b, p. 34)

Through these suggestions, for example, the ERO report provides some broad commentary on the state of counselling in New Zealand secondary schools, but the report's general conflation of guidance and counselling is problematic. The report does not distinguish the particular professional therapeutic orientation of counselling from the shared guidance responsibilities of significant numbers of school staff. There is still some distance to go before New Zealand has research that, as Cooper (2009) advocated with respect to research of school counselling in the UK, demonstrates the worth of school counselling and improves the quality of services to young people.

Method

Before embarking on the current study we consulted with NZAC and some local school guidance counsellors. As the survey questionnaire, we chose to use the Counselling Service Evaluation form, a post-counselling satisfaction questionnaire employed by Cooper (2004). Its benefits were that it was already available and tested, and had offered useful commentary on the perspectives of students in that study's three schools. While Cooper's study used the survey at the conclusion of counselling, in the context of a particular pilot intervention, our study included young people in ongoing counselling. Two minor changes were made to the questionnaire on the advice of New Zealand school counsellors: a question about the culture of clients was added, along with a question about the extent to which respondents experienced their culture as being respected.

For delivery of the survey we used open-source Lime Survey (http://www.limesurvey.org/) software. This software provides descriptive statistical analysis (e.g., frequency of category responses). The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS Statistics version 20) was used for further analysis. Most survey items were quantitative, as reported below. An open, qualitative question asked respondents how counselling had helped them. In analysing responses to this question, we overlaid Cooper's (2004) analytic categories on our data. In many respects, young people in Aotearoa New Zealand responded with comments similar to those in the Cooper study. However, we also noticed responses that did not appear to us to fit neatly with the categories produced by the person-centred orientation of the Cooper study. We discuss these below.

Recruitment process

In November 2012 we provided material to NZAC for forwarding to those members who were school guidance counsellors. We requested that school guidance counsellors each approach their principals to seek permission for the study to run in their schools. We provided:

- separate written information for counsellors and principals
- one Consent Form per school for principal and counsellor to sign
- an Information Sheet for students who would be recruited by counsellors.

The written information for counsellors and principals asked that, during two weeks in February 2013, school guidance counsellors in participating schools give all student clients an Information Sheet. This sheet had on it an email address for clients to use if they wanted to receive individual access to a Lime Survey survey (closed format), as described above. This email address was set up for this project, with only the researchers and prospective respondents having access to the survey.

Unfortunately, between our information going out to counsellors and the survey taking place, further surveys related to counselling in schools appeared, requiring the attention of counsellors during February 2013, the period we had already selected for our study to run: PPTA with a survey of school guidance counsellors, and ERO with its surveys of school guidance counsellors (also distributed through NZAC), senior leaders, and young people. This was a moment of survey-saturation that had unanticipated effects for recruitment for our study. It is estimated that our request for participation reached more than 200 school counsellors. In November 2012, twenty-three counsellors returned participation forms signed by themselves and their principals.

Forty-one young people responded to the online survey. This relatively small number—compared with 119 reported by Cooper (2004)—is a limitation of our study, and the results should be read in this light. The number of respondents may also have been affected by the somewhat cumbersome two-step process of access to the survey described above, which meant that only clients in counselling could access the survey.

Comment on the response rate

The appropriate sample size for a population-based survey is determined largely by three factors: the estimated prevalence of the variable of interest, the desired level of confidence, and the acceptable margin of error. Many surveys are not based on probability samples, but rather on finding a suitable collection of respondents to

complete the survey. Such surveys are referred to as non-probability samples. In such samples, the relationship between the target population and the survey sample cannot be measured and potential bias is unknowable.

For this study the sample was purposive. The disadvantages of such samples are that there is no possibility of knowing the degree of accuracy achieved and there is no possibility of calculating the sample error. Therefore, conclusions beyond the sample are not justified. However, non-statistical inferences can be drawn on the basis of logical considerations.

Results

Who were the young people who responded?

Thirty-two young women and nine young men responded to the survey. The respondents' year-levels are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Year level of respondents

Year level	Year 13	Year 12	Year 11	Year 10	Year 9	Year 7/8
Number of respondents	7	10	13	2	6	3

The question about the cultural identity of respondents was one that those we consulted locally asked to have added to the Cooper (2004) questionnaire. The majority of respondents identified themselves as Pākehā (20) or European (16). Five respondents identified themselves as Māori, two as Asian, and six respondents were classified as Other. We note that there is a low percentage of Māori respondents and no Pasifika respondents. With the small size of this study, and no data about the schools themselves, questions arise for future research. All but one respondent indicated that they felt their culture was respected in the counselling.

Use of the counselling service

Most respondents (71%) reported that they were self-referred (24.5%), or referred by a teacher (27%) or friend (19.5%). Deans, parents, other counsellors, and a doctor made up the other sources of referral.

Almost half the respondents (46%) had seen the counsellor more than 11 times (for further detail, see Figure 1). This result is in contrast to the Cooper (2004) study, where only 13% of respondents had seen the counsellor more than 11 times and just over half

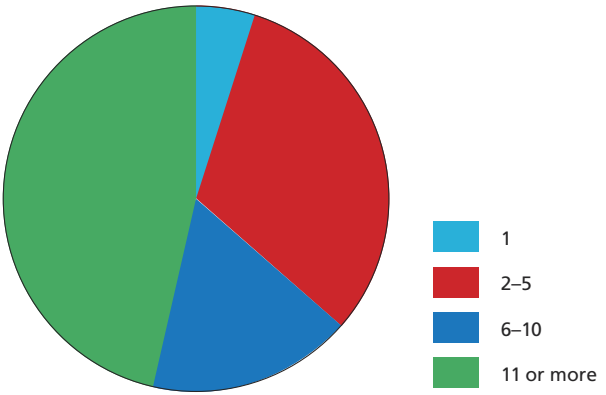

Figure 1: Percentage of students who attended varying numbers of counselling sessions before and during the study

(51%) had seen the counsellor between two and five times. It may be that the students who responded to our study were those who had used the service more, or that the difference in provision in New Zealand means that counsellors have been available to students over the span of their years at secondary school.

Information about the service

Almost all respondents (93%) said they had enough information about the counselling service. Of the three respondents who would have liked more information, one simply commented "[I was] new to the school," and the other two made the following comments about what they would like to have known:

- What would happen there [in counselling].
- How amazing and how much help they [the counsellor] would be.

Levels of overall satisfaction

As can be seen in Figure 2, 93% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the counselling they received. This level of satisfaction is similar to that reported by Cooper (2004) (88%).

Extent of helpfulness of counselling

The majority (80%) of respondents reported that counselling was helpful to quite an extent, while 20% reported that they had experienced counselling as a little helpful. The modal response for both this study and the Cooper (2004) study was "quite a lot."

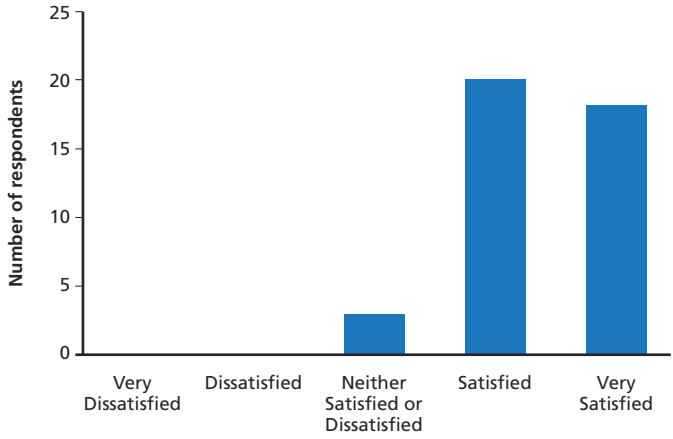

Figure 2: Levels of satisfaction with counselling

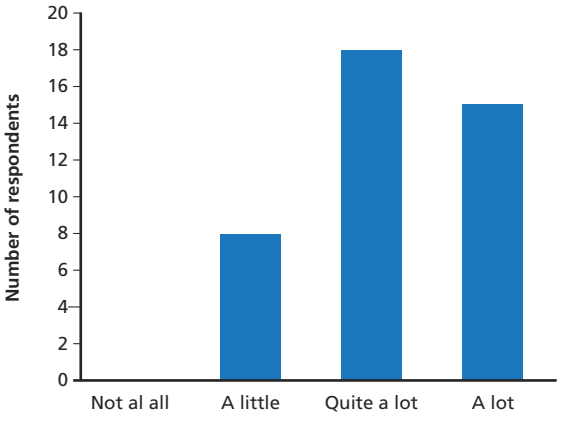

Figure 3: Perceived helpfulness of counselling

How the counselling helped

All respondents provided responses to the qualitative question about how counselling was helpful to them. This level of response is an unusual outcome in surveys. Given the small size of our study, we include all these responses below.

Of the analytic categories used in the Cooper (2004) study, we used the following:

- Talking and being listened to
- Guidance and advice
- Problem-solving
- Specific improvements
- Self-esteem

We amended the following categories, by adding to them:

- Feeling understood *or supported*
- Insight and awareness, *new perspectives*
- Confidentiality *and trust*

These changes were made when the particular category did not appear to capture all that a respondent comment was suggesting. For example, to *feeling understood* we added *or supported* to capture the sense of active support that was more than an experience of feeling understood.

We added the following categories:

- School
- Building relationships
- Normalising difficulties
- Hard times and struggle

The following Cooper (2004) study category was not directly used by any respondent: *getting things off one's chest*. However, two respondents wrote about "getting things off your shoulders:" we notice the particularity of language use. A person-centred orientation to therapy and in research is likely to make available different language than relationally oriented approaches.

Talking and being listened to

Participants wrote about the value of having someone to talk to who would listen.

> *Cos u had someone 2 talk 2.*
>
> *Good to talk.*
>
> *It helps me relax to have someone to talk to when you have a few problems.*
>
> *It's useful to me because I can tell her anything and she will listen and she is very kind too.*
>
> *Nice to be able to talk to someone.*
>
> *I can talk to someone about my issues. It's a place where no-one laughs at me if I cry.*

Feeling understood or supported

Respondents valued the support and understanding provided by the counsellor.

> *I have faced many struggles throughout High School and having my guidance counsellor there to support me right the way through it was fantastic.*
>
> *It gave me someone to talk to who understands and helped me to see what is happening through another perspective.*
>
> *It was just nice to have someone to talk to, someone who would listen, someone who wouldn't judge you or your problems. It was very helpful, a great way to get things off your shoulders, it was a good feeling to know someone did care about you and wanted to help you.*
>
> *It was nice to know that you could talk to someone and they wouldn't judge you or anything and they would help and give you any advice needed and that it was completely confidential.*
>
> *Understand me and talk to me to help me through the tough times.*

Insight and awareness, new perspectives

Respondents reported that the process in the counselling room supported them to understand themselves and the situations they were dealing with. These understandings made action possible.

> *Better understanding of self, thoughts, plans to help deal with problems, etc. Counselling helped me in a way I thought it couldn't have. It helped me to look at things in a different way and interpret my emotions. Talking about my problems has helped me overcome them.*
>
> *Helped me realise how much I need help with depression.*
>
> *Helps me express my feelings and talk through my problems.*
>
> *It helped me talk about my problems that have been getting too big and to de-stress, look at things from different views and get help from someone that I know will keep it a secret or tell someone who needs to know.*

Problem-solving; guidance and advice; self-esteem

Only one respondent specifically mentioned each of the following: problem-solving; guidance and advice; and self-esteem.

> *Helped me figure out what to do in some situations.*

> *I got good advice about how to deal with problems and stand up for myself.*
>
> *Just made me feel better about myself.*

Confidentiality and trust

Counselling in schools provides a unique space and an interpersonal encounter based in confidentiality and trust.

> *Made me feel better about myself, felt relieved that I could talk to someone who I could trust. Huge relief.*

Specific improvements

Many respondents named specific problems that they had dealt with effectively.

> *Anger issues. I really liked it and it has really helped me last year and continuing.*
>
> *Gave me new skills on how to deal with family, bullying, and how to make friends. Gave me skills on how to accept myself and see the good in me not only the bad. Has helped me to gain more confidence in myself.*
>
> *Helped me make my mind up to finish an unhealthy relationship.*
>
> *It helped me so much that I've become a better and stronger person and has built my confidence* ☺
>
> *I now have only a few issues.*
>
> *It has made me understand myself better, and get me to a place where I feel happy.… I have gotten the help I need to manage my anxiety and fully understand I am not alone.… It helped me share my emotions and how to deal with bullying, also family situations.*
>
> *It was helpful, as I was insecure and not confident about being myself and standing up for myself; I am now able to stand up for myself in a non-abusive and a good way.*
>
> *My stress level went down.*
>
> *Helped me with my problems at home and a little bit at school.*

School

Cooper (2004) did not report any young people mentioning school. Three students in our study reported that counselling made a difference to their schoolwork.

Helps me at school.

It helped me get my work done right.

It helped me to overcome personal challenges that disrupted my schoolwork and life at home.

Building relationships

While we don't know what the nature of the group is to which the respondent below refers, this response highlights a difference between having a counsellor as a school staff member, and a counsellor visiting the school from an external agency.

The counsellor I have at school has guided my group and I since year 9. Because of her advice, support, and guidance, we have become closer than ever as a group—almost like a family.

Normalising of difficulties

Prior's (2012b) study of the resources on which young people draw to explain their experiences of counselling suggested that there is value in "the normalisation of their difficulties as ordinary problems of adolescence." Such a practice "avoids the potential medicalization of their subjective experience of distress and opens up a problem-solver subject position from which accessing help becomes possible" (p. 15).

It has helped me deal with big things in my life and being able to bounce ideas off someone helped me see that what I was going through was normal.

Hard times and struggle

When problems are spoken of in terms of "hard times" or struggle, the opportunity opens up to understand difficulties in ways that do not pathologise the self as in deficit.

I have been in counselling almost 3 years now and I probably wouldn't be here if I wasn't. Counselling has helped me through a lot. I don't know where I'd be [if] I didn't see a counsellor regularly.

They helped me when I was going through a hard time.

Helpfulness in particular life dimensions

Students were asked about the extent to which counselling had helped or made improvements across five dimensions of life. As can be seen in Figure 4, across the

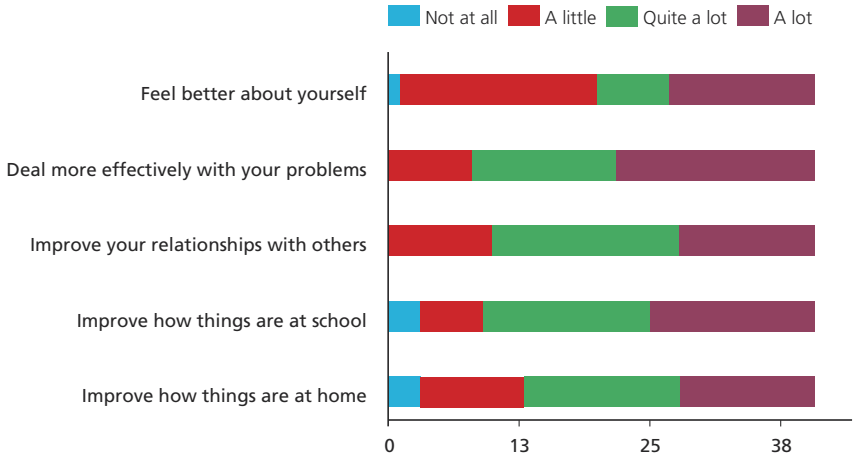

Figure 4: The extent to which counselling helped to improve aspects of students' lives

following four dimensions most students reported that counselling had helped to improve things quite a lot or a lot:

- How things are at home
- How things are at school
- Relationships with others
- Dealing more effectively with problems[1]

However, it was in the area of feeling better about themselves that respondents reported *least* improvement. Namely, 19 (46%) of the 41 respondents reported that counselling had helped them feel *a little* better about themselves; the proportion of respondents who reported least improvement in *feeling better about themselves* was significantly larger than the proportion of respondents who reported the same lower level of improvement for any other dimensions. The results of these comparisons are listed in Table 2.

Further, for each of these life dimensions we compared the proportion of respondents in the Cooper (2004) survey who reported that counselling had helped them *a lot* or *quite a lot* with the proportion of respondents in our study who gave the same response. The only dimension where the two groups differed significantly was *improved relationships with others*. Namely, a significantly greater proportion of

Table 2. Z-test comparisons between the proportion of respondents feeling a little better about themselves and the proportion feeling a little better on other nominated dimensions

Dimension	Proportion reporting "only a little" (improvement)	Z score
Home	.024	2.08*
School	.015	3.12**
Relationships	.024	2.08*
Problems	.2	2.58**

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

respondents in our cohort (76%) said that their relationships with others had improved *a lot* or *quite a lot* than in the Cooper cohort (53%), $z = 2.48$, $p < 0.01$.

Re-using the service

All but one respondent reported that on the basis of their experience of counselling:

- They would probably or definitely use the counselling service again;
- They would recommend the counselling service to a friend.

Importance of having a school counsellor

This question was particularly relevant in the context of the Cooper (2004) study, an investigation of a pilot scheme to make a counselling service available in schools where previously no such service was available. The survey asked respondents to rank the value of having a school counsellor on a 0–10 scale, with a ranking of 10 indicating "essential."

As can be seen in Figure 5, in our cohort 93% of respondents ranked the importance of having a school counsellor to be 9 or 10, compared with 60% in Cooper's (2004) study. This difference was statistically significant, $z = 3.92$, $p < 0.001$. The modal response in each study was 10; in our study 80% of respondents ranked the counselling service as essential and in Cooper's study 42% of respondents did so. The ranking of 10 in our study did not depend on the number of visits that students had had with counsellors.

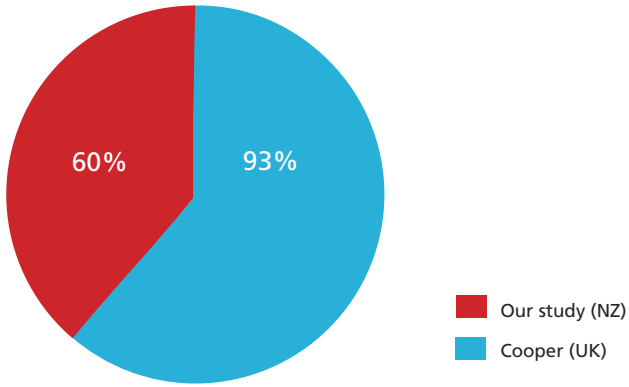

Figure 5: Percentage of students giving a ranking of 9 or 10 to the value of having a school counsellor

Other comments

Students were invited to offer any other comments that they thought might help improve the service. Twenty-six respondents (63%) wrote a comment, again a high response rate for a survey study. However, many made very similar responses to those reported above in "How the counselling helped."

> *I believe that more counsellors should be provided as it is an essential part of schooling.*
>
> *Counsellors need more recognition and respect in schools.*
>
> *Keep the services there; without them, lots of people would be depressed, especially girls.*
>
> *Counselling has guided me to be an independent student.*
>
> *Counselling has saved my life.*
>
> *No comments; it is great already.*

Discussion

If research into school counselling is to offer what Cooper (2009) suggested, a demonstration of its worth and findings to improve the quality of services, what does this small survey study contribute? In the light of the recent substantial ERO (2103a, b) reviews

of the broad sweep of guidance and counselling, does this small study have anything to offer? Most significantly, the current study has a clear focus on young people's experiences of counselling; in particular, it does not conflate pastoral care, guidance, and counselling, as the ERO reviews do. Further, in common with the Cooper (2004, 2006) evaluative studies, all young people surveyed in our cohort had experienced school counselling as clients. Our survey study has a clear and limited focus on a small number of students' experiences of the practice of counselling in schools. What then can we learn from our focus and findings?

Most respondents were Pākehā or European and female, and most reported that they were helped by the counselling. We cannot claim that this finding is representative but it at least raises some questions for consideration in terms of equity of access. While no inferences can be drawn about access to counselling in these schools because no information is available about the ratio of student ethnicities, the question about equity of access for Māori and Pasifika students remains. What about other groups that may or may not have accessed the service? If school counselling is generally experienced as helpful, it would seem to be important that everyone has access to this service, as Waldegrave (1985) argued many years ago about family therapy.

While respondents reported that they had good information about the counselling service, perhaps school counsellors might review how their services are promoted, particularly to improve availability to groups not currently accessing the service. Both within-school and across-schools data could provide evidence about students who access counselling, and what barriers there might be to access for students who have not used the service.

Young people reported a number of ways in which counselling had been helpful, including specific improvements such as leaving an unhealthy relationship, managing anxiety and stress, and standing up for oneself in an appropriate way. These reports suggest a purposeful change orientation on the part of both young people and counsellors. It might then be easy to overlook the significance of the first two categories of helpfulness, talking and being listened to, and feeling understood and supported, as these might be taken-for-granted aspects not only of counselling but also of everyday relationships. However, if, as a number of scholars (see, for example, Butler, 1997; Davies, 1991; Weingarten, 2000) have argued, identity depends upon opportunities to speak ourselves into existence and to have that speaking acknowledged by others, the pedagogy of listening (Ellwood, 2009) that is offered in school counselling provides young people with an important resource in identity formation. The significance of

the quality of skilled professional listening and responding should not be underestimated. As a researcher who has carried out numerous and complex studies of school counselling in the UK, Cooper is cited as having stated:

> *Just knowing someone is there to talk to may make a big difference to some young people and could be the early intervention that means they are less likely to develop problems in the future.* (Jackson, 2012, p. 7)

Following our presentation of results from this survey study at the 2014 New Zealand Association of Counsellors School Guidance Counsellors' conference, we offered a workshop to explore with participants how individual schools are already gathering evidence of the extent and efficacy of counselling practice, and what else might be needed. Many creative examples were offered, suggesting that there are strong evidence bases in many individual schools. This information indicates that a useful contribution could be made by a study that explores the measures already being employed, the data being generated, and the means of analysis being employed. With these aspects identified, there is the potential for what is already known in individual schools to be brought together across schools, where measures are compatible, in order both to demonstrate the value of counselling and to enrich future practice.

As Cooper (2009) noted, however, robust research into school counselling requires resourcing. In an absence of resources, this small New Zealand study demonstrates that those student clients who participated in the survey experienced school counselling as offering them meaningful support to bring about change. Their local perspectives would seem largely to concur with Cooper's (2009) wider view that school counselling is a "non-stigmatising, accessible and effective form of early intervention" (p. 138). According to these local students, school counselling has contributed to significant improvement in a range of dimensions of their lives.

Endnote

1. We do not know if the (small number of) "not at all" scores for school and home were because counselling had not helped students in areas where they had wanted help, or if those were not aspects of their lives on which counselling had focused.

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